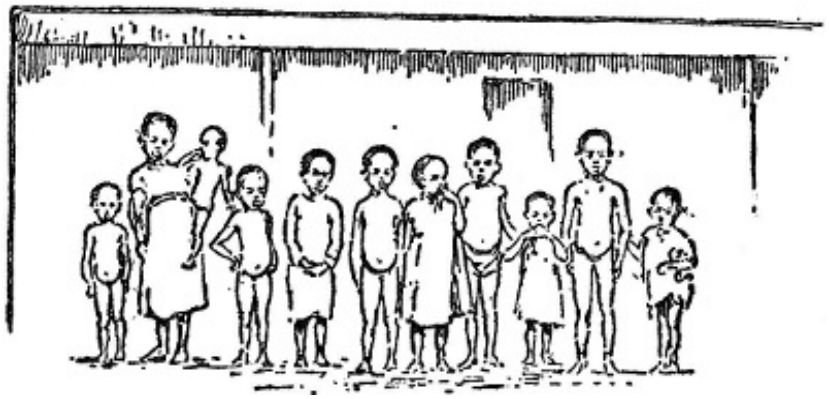

SOME OKOYONG BAIRNS.

CHAPTER V

Ma's great love for children; her rescue of outcast twins from death; the story of little Susie, the pet of the household; and something about a new kind of birthday that came oftener than once a year.

Ma's house at Ekenge was always like a big nursery.

Mothers are much the same all over the world, but in Africa they are very ignorant and thoughtless, and do not know how to care for their children, while they believe so much in the strange customs of the country that things are done to the little ones which seem to us hard-hearted and cruel. It was worse in Ma's days, when most of the people were still slaves.

She was always sorriest for the babies, they were so helpless, and the only times she was really angry were when she saw them neglected or starved or made drunk. Then she was like a tigress, and the people fled before her. "Poor wee helpless things," she would say as she picked them up and thought of the way the white babies at home were cared for. She saw in the tiniest babe one for whom Jesus died; and she loved them all, and washed them and nursed them, and sang to them day and night.

There was no cradle in the Mission House, but something better. Ma's bed was in the middle of the room, and around it were hammocks slung to the roof, from each of which a cord was hung. In these were placed the babies, and if any one became wakeful during the night and cried, she would pull the string and set its hammock swinging, and soon the little one was slumbering again. Sometimes she had to look after half a dozen or more at once, and two or three hammocks would be going at the same time.

With many she had a hard struggle, but never grudged any trouble to make them well. She would come home late after a long day's tramp in the forest, tired and hungry and sleepy, and send Janie to bed and stay up herself and tend the sick and suffering ones. You can fancy her there alone in the mud-house in the forest in the quiet hours of the night, bending over a wasted form, watching the pain in its eyes with tears in her own, giving it medicine, soothing it, and seeking to make it

comfy, and beside her the pale dark shape of Death, with its grim smile, waiting for another victim.

Ma sometimes won the child from the grave; sometimes she failed, and then she was very sad. But she could not help it. The people believed that sickness was caused by evil spirits, and most of the children that came to her were already dying and beyond her love and skill. When they closed their eyes she dressed them in a pinafore and put them in a box covered with white flowers, and buried them in her children's cemetery.

Some women who called at Ma's yard were gossiping about the day's marketing, when one said it was funny that a baby should live after being five days and six nights in the bush.

"What's that?" demanded Ma. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing, Ma. The girl baby that was thrown away because the mother is dead is still alive, for we heard her crying as we came along this morning."

Ma jumped up and went flying to the spot. She found the waif on some waste ground, terribly thin and eaten by insects and crying feebly. Taking her home Ma laid her in a big calabash and brooded over her with tender care, and by and by she recovered, and became healthy and pretty. "The child of wonder," the people called her; but Ma named her Mary, after herself, and she became one of her house-children, and stayed with her until she married.

Twins gave Ma the sorest time. The people believed that all sorts of troubles would come to them if these were allowed to live. Ma laughed at them.

"Twins are just like other children," she said; "and if only you let them grow up you will see for yourselves that there is no difference. Look at my bonnie Janie—she is a twin."

But it was no use. So the only thing for her to do was to save the little mites before they could be murdered. It was Eme Ete who told her when twins came, and when she got the secret message she dropped the work she was doing and made swiftly for the spot. Sometimes they were already dead and thrown away in pots, and the mother driven into the backwoods. If she were in time she took the infants home and nursed them and guarded them from the father and relatives, who usually tried to steal and destroy them.

One day she saved twins in her own village, and took them into the Mission House and put them in her bed. The people were alarmed, and said that dreadful things would happen. Chief Edem kept away. "I cannot go any more to my Mother's house," he groaned; "no, never any more." No one spoke to her. Mothers kept their children out of her way. She was sad and sorrowful, but she would not give in, for she knew she was doing right.

One of the twins died, but the other grew and waxed strong. The people liked their Ma so much that they, too, were unhappy at the cloud that had fallen between, and at last they began to make friends.

"Ma, forgive us," they said humbly. "We have not been taught right. Let your heart warm to us again."

So the shadow passed away. What cheered Ma most of all was that the father of the twin carried it home, and took back the mother, which showed that the old stupid notion was beginning to die.

IYE.

Another day there was a great uproar. Twins had come to a slave woman, called Iye, about five miles off. Ma met her in the forest carrying the infants in a box on her head, a howling mob of men and women hounding her on. They had destroyed all her property and torn up her clothes. Ma took the box, because no one would touch it, and helped the poor mother along to the Mission House. They could not go by the usual path, as the villagers would not have used it afterwards, so they had to wait in the hot sun until another lane was cut.

The boy twin was dead, but the girl was alive, and with care became plump and strong. She was a bonnie child with a fair skin and sweet ways, and she became the pet of the household. Ma called her Susie, after her elder sister, and loved her as much as if she had been her own. Even the mother, after she got well and went away, sometimes came back to see her, and was proud of her good looks.

Fourteen months passed. One day Janie went upstairs to put a child to sleep, and asked Mana, one of the girls, to look after Susie, as she was full of play and mischief. Mana took her, and while getting the tea ready, placed a jug of boiling water on the floor for a moment. Susie, babylike, seized it and spilt the water over her bare body. She was dreadfully scalded. Ma was frantic, and for a fortnight scarcely let her out of her arms. Often the child smiled up in her face and held up her wee hand to be kissed. Ma at last carried her down to Creek Town, and woke up the doctor there at midnight in the hope that something more could be done. But the shock and wounds had been too severe, and when Ma got back the bright life of the queen of the household flickered and went out.

Ma's grief was pitiful, and made even the people wonder. "See how she loved her," they said one to another. They came and mourned with her, and stood by at the burial. Susie was robed in white, with her own string of beads round her neck, and a white flower in her hand.

It was very lonesome for Ma afterwards. "My heart aches for my darling," she wrote. "Oh, the empty place and the silence and the vain longing for the sweet voice and the soft caress and the funny ways. Oh, Susie! Susie!"

Her heart went out towards Iye, the slave mother, and by and by she bought her for £10 and made

her free, and she remained in the Mission House, a faithful worker, and a great help to Ma and those who came after her.

All the stories of Ma's adventures with twins cannot be told, because she had to do with hundreds of them, but this is one which shows what she had often to go through.

One afternoon when she was busy teaching in the school, a message was thrown suddenly at her from the door.

"Ma! come, twins."

"Where?" she asked.

"Twelve miles away in the bush, and the mother is very ill."

Ma went to the door and looked up. "There is going to be a storm," she said, "and I have a sickly baby to look after and night will soon be here, but—come along, Janie, we'll go."

Darkness fell ere they reached the spot, and the stars were hidden behind clouds, and they could hardly see a yard in front.

They found the woman lying unconscious on the ground. One of the infants was dead, and Janie dug a hole and buried it. Ma ordered the husband and his slave to make a stretcher, which they did very unwillingly. Then she placed the woman on it and bade them carry her. Still more unwillingly, and grumbling all the time—for they dreaded to touch a twin-mother—they obeyed. Janie lifted the living twin, and all set forth by the light of a piece of fire-stick glowing at the end. This went out, and they stumbled along in the dense darkness. At last they stopped. They had lost themselves. The men laid down their burden and went off to grope for a trail, and Ma and Janie were alone in the eerie forest with the moaning form at their feet.

"Oh, Ma, they may not come back," cried Janie.

"Well, my lassie, we'll just bide where we are until morning."

A shining ghostly thing leapt about in the darkness. Janie's heart went to her mouth. But it was only the men back with a torch made of palm tassel and oil which they had got from a hut. They went on again.

When the Mission yard was reached the men were so tired that they fell down and went to sleep at once. Ma, too, was tired, but her work was not done. She got a hammer and nails and some sheets of iron and knocked up a little lean-to, in which she put the woman and nursed her back to consciousness, and fed and comforted her. Then, utterly worn out, she just lay down where she was in her soiled and damp clothes, and fell sound asleep.

The baby died next day, and the mother grew worse, and there was no hope. She was sore in

spirit as well as in body, and sorrowed for her fate and the loss of her husband's love. Ma soothed her, and told her she was going to a better world, where no one would be angry with her for being a twin-mother.

When she passed away the people would not touch or come near her, and so Ma did all that was needful herself, and placed her in a coffin, and then the husband and his slave bore her away and buried her in a lonely spot in the bush.

Poor twin-mothers of Africa!

Though Ma did not save very many of the twin-children that passed through her hands, she did a great work by making the people realise how foolish and sinful a thing it was to be afraid of them and kill them.

The household had grown and grown. We know about Janie and Mary, both trickified and bright little maidens. Then there was Mana, a faithful and affectionate lassie. One day, in her own country, she had gone to the spring for water, and was seized by two men and brought to Okoyong and sold to Eme Ete, who gave her to Ma. Wee Annie was there also, very shy and timid, but a good nurse. Her parents had stolen and eaten a dog in the bush, and there was much trouble, and the mother died, and Annie would have been buried in the grave had not Ma taken her. Six other boys and girls with sad stories also lived in the Mission House, so that Ma often felt she was like the old woman who lived in a shoe, and who had so many children she didn't know what to do.

It was not easy for her to keep in stock the food and medicine and clothes that were needed for the family, and sometimes she would run out of things. Once, when she was short of tins of milk, she strapped a baby on her back and tramped down the forest trail to Creek Town, got what she wanted, and patiently tramped back again.

Another time she was watching some women who were imprisoned within a stockade and were going to be killed, and as she could not leave the place Janie handed her cups of tea through the fence. Suddenly a tornado came on and flooded the Mission House and soaked all the clothes. Ma herself was wet to the skin. To add to her trouble Janie came and said, "Ma, we have no milk, and the baby is crying for some."

"Well, Janie, I'll just have to trot to Creek Town for it. I'll get some dry clothes too. Put the baby in a basket."

Slipping out in the darkness, and taking a woman to help to carry the baby, she set forth. They lost their way in the rain, and wandered hither and thither, and only reached the town at the dawning of the day. Ma roused one of the ladies of the Mission, obtained the milk and a change of clothes, and lay down for a little sleep. Hearing that she had come, King Eyo got his canoe ready, and sent her back by the river. Her absence from the stockade had not been noticed, and she was able later to settle the trouble without bloodshed.

There were plenty of merry days in the home-life of Ekenge. Wherever girls are gathered together there is sure to be fun and laughter, and Ma had always the heart and will of a girl for jokes and mischief. She could not take her bairns into lighted streets or gay shops, or to places of amusement, for there was none of these things in the bush, but sometimes she gave them a holiday, and a special tea, and gifts. Perhaps, however, the most delightful treat they had was when a box arrived from across the sea.

All over Scotland loving hearts were thinking of Ma, and loving hands were working for her; and clothing, books, pictures, and knick-knacks were being collected and packed in boxes and sent out addressed to her in Okoyong. The Sunday School children also had their thoughts on the Mission, and gave their pennies and halfpennies to it just as Ma herself had done when a little girl. About this time they gathered up enough money to build a steel steamer for use on the inland rivers and creeks, and it was now plying up and down, carrying mails and parcels and missionaries. It was called the David Williamson, after a minister of the Church who visited Calabar, but the natives named it the Smoking Canoe.

You can imagine the excitement at the Mission House at Ekenge when a half-naked messenger, his dark body perspiring and glistening in the sun, appeared, and cried:

THE DAVID WILLIAMSON.

"Ma, the Smoking Canoe is at the beach."

"Ho-ho! gifts from Makara land," sang half a dozen throats. "Oh, Ma, when can we go? Let us go now."

Ma was as excited as the rest, so off went men, women, and children, streaming along the path to the river, where the David Williamson lay.

As the boxes were usually too heavy to be carried, they were opened up on the beach and the contents made into parcels. These the natives balanced on their heads and went off, a long file of them, through the forest to Ekenge.

Sometimes it needed a second and a third journey before all the goods were together again.

What a delight it was to Ma to open the packages! What cries of rapture came from the children and the people looking on as they saw all the things that were to them so wonderful and beautiful.

There were print garments by the dozens, woollen articles, caps, scarves, handkerchiefs, towels, ribbons and braids, thimbles, needles and pins, beads, buttons, reels, spoons, knives, scrap-books, picture-books and cards, texts, pens, and a host of other things. It was almost with awe that the women touched the pretty baby-clothes, and the men clapped their hands as Ma held up a blue or scarlet gown or jacket.

The dolls were looked upon as gods, and Ma would not give them away in case they were worshipped: she kept the prettily dressed ones to teach the women and girls how clothes were made and how they were worn. Some common things, which children at home would not value, they treasured. When Janie was handed a penwiper, "Oh, Ma," she said reproachfully, "wipe a dirty pen with that? No, no." And she put it up on the wall as an ornament!

One old woman was given a copy of the picture "The Light of the World." "Oh," she cried in joy, "I shall never be lonely any more!"

If you had watched Ma closely when she was opening the packages, you would have seen that she was seeking for something with a quick and impatient eye. When at last she found what she wanted she gave a shout of triumph. Tins of home-made toffee and chocolate! They were always there, for every one knew she liked sweets. When at home she used to ask that these might be sent out, because the bush bairns were fond of them, but her friends just laughed in her face. "Miss Slessor," they would say, "you can eat as many as the bairns!" "Of course I can," she confessed.

After the children had looked at all the gifts Ma would tell them where they came from, and would kneel down and thank Jesus for putting it into the hearts of the givers in Scotland to care for His forlorn black folk in Africa.

Then Ma said, "Away to bed, bairns. But oh, hasn't it been grand? It's just been like a birthday. Many happy returns!"

Ma did not give all the things away. A brilliant gown might go to the chief as a gift—and he would sit proudly in Court with it and be admired and envied by all,—or a flannelette garment to some poor and aged woman to keep her warm during the shivery fog season; but as a rule Ma liked the people to work for what they got, or to pay something for them. Thus she taught them to want clothes and other things, and showed them how to get them, and in this way she was a real Empire builder. She used to say that there was no truer or more successful Empire maker than the missionary.

OPENING ONE OF THE BOXES FROM SCOTLAND.